

*To develop a strong sense of professionalism, a teacher must focus on the critical elements of attitude, behavior, and communication.*

**E**very teacher must develop the characteristics of a professional and model professionalism every day. In fact, among the standards of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) is a requirement that teacher candidates demonstrate specific dispositions of professionals (NCATE 2001). Bridges (in Ben-Peretz 2001, 50) advised that, aside from academic qualifications, professional teachers must “act in an ethical manner, based on an explicit or implicit code of conduct.”

*Pamela A. Kramer is Professor of Education at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania and Coordinator of the Elementary Professional Development School Program. She also serves as Counselor of the Gamma Xi Chapter of Kappa Delta Pi.*



What are the elements of professionalism? This article categorizes some of the most critical ones into three main categories: attitude, behavior, and communication. Addressing these areas can help any teacher to develop a stronger sense of professionalism.

## Attitude

Attitude is everything! A positive attitude is an essential component of professionalism (Hurst and Reding 2000).

Beginning at the simplest level, teachers cannot let their personal lives interfere with their professional attitude. Even when having a bad day, a teacher still needs to maintain a positive attitude and not take out a bad mood on the students. A professional needs to push away outside concerns or distractions and focus on the task at hand. No one would want a surgeon to let personal anger interfere with a patient's operation. Similarly, a teacher shouldn't let negative feelings spill over to the students.

One of the best things a teacher can do is to love his or her students. It is so important for students to know that their teachers care for them. A professional doesn't view his or her profession as just a *job*, but rather sees it as a *calling* that is all about caring for children. The ability to make personal connections with students is an identifiable trait of a successful teacher (Pajak 2001).

It's easy to fall into the trap of focusing on the negative. Yes, teaching is a demanding profession; but if teachers dwell on the challenges, they could easily spend all their time complaining. Lorenz (2002, 327) urged that every teacher "resist the pettiness of the staff lounge and behave like a true

educator. Bottom line: whining about not being treated as a professional just betrays the fact that you really aren't one." Every job and profession has its ups and downs, and a true professional focuses his or her energy in a positive way. This calls for an attitude of assertiveness. When a teacher sees that something is not working well, he or she needs to take action and seek solutions.

Risk taking is another element of a professional attitude. Wong and Wong (1998, 304) stated,

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"There can be no accomplishment without taking some risk." A professional should be willing to take risks and try new things, and thus avoid falling into a rut and becoming stagnant.

An attitude of confidence is another key component of professionalism. Lack of confidence can lead to social errors and unprofessional behavior (Hurst and Reding 2000). Teachers must know and trust themselves and their abilities.

An attitude of initiative is also an important element. Hurst and Reding (2000, 47) emphasized, "Professionals set goals for themselves and their students. They know what they want to achieve." One of the first signs that preservice teachers are becoming

more professional is that they begin to take initiative, rather than wait to be told what to do.

Lastly, effective teachers need to commit themselves to being life-long learners. Wong and Wong (1998, 294) described a professional as "someone who, without supervision or regulation; is a responsible person; has a continuing growth plan to achieve competence; and strives continuously to raise the level of each new group of students." Hurst and Reding (2000) stressed the importance of professionals staying current in their field of study.

## Behavior

Numerous behaviors are associated with professionalism. Wong and Wong (1998, 293) stated, "A professional is defined not by the business a person is in but by the way that person does his or her business."

Preparedness, one behavior associated with professionalism, is an important focus in the current standards movement. The NCATE Standards require that "the teacher candidate knows the subject matter and can teach it effectively so students can learn" (Wise and Leibbrand 2001). The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) also includes a proposition that teachers should know the content and methodology of what they teach (Seifert 1999). Teachers need to be prepared to teach the content of their lessons, as well as be prepared with the proper materials and resources. Hurst and Reding (2000, 45) reminded us, "Teachers need to be prepared every time they enter the classroom." Many beginning teachers underestimate how much time proper planning and prepara-

tion entail. The sooner they understand this, the better.

Hurst and Reding (2000) identified punctuality as another critical behavior associated with professionalism. Tardiness does not go over well in the school setting. Children cannot be left unsupervised. Therefore, it is critical that teachers arrive on time, whether it is for the start of the school day or for picking up the students from a special class.

Professionals, metaphorically, live in glass houses; they are under constant scrutiny and are held to the highest moral and ethical standards. Teachers, expected to be role models for their students, must carefully examine how their behavior, both in and out of the classroom, might make an impression on others. A teacher's actions and influence as a role model can either help or harm others. Just the hint of any impropriety can both ruin a teacher's reputation and leave students disappointed and confused.

Like it or not, people are often judged by their appearance. A professional is expected to dress in a respectable manner. Wong and Wong (1998, 51) caution, "You will be treated as you are dressed." While the level of formality has declined in many professions, many types of clothing still are considered inappropriate in professional settings. Clothes that are too provocative, casual, or sloppy are inappropriate. Body piercings, tattoos, and other bold fashions are often looked upon unfavorably. Teachers are encouraged to err on the side of formality, rather than to dress in casual or contemporary fashion. Hurst and Reding (2000, 13) advised, "A teacher should look like the teacher, not one of the students. School is not the place to

make wild fashion statements or to dress in provocative ways."

Being able to discern the types of topics that are appropriate for conversation is an important quality of professional behavior. Hurst and Reding (2000) recommended that teachers avoid responding to inappropriate questions and ones that are too personal. In conversation, they also should avoid interrupting others and should think before they speak.

to do in the classroom is imperative for professional behavior. Hurst and Reding (2000, 36) suggested, "It is important for teachers to recognize their role in this chain of command. . . . An aspect of being a professional is the ability to be a follower as well as a leader." This is especially important for the preservice teacher who is not an employee of the school district. Yet, at the same time, educators should be prepared to take



The NBPTS identified respect, the act of displaying a high regard for students, as one of the 13 Dimensions of Teaching Expertise (Helms 2001). Hurst and Reding (2000) also cited respect, as well as courtesy, as key components of professionalism. A professional respects all others, even when that respect is not returned. As a role model for appropriate behavior, a teacher always must show respect to colleagues, parents, and students. A professional treats everyone with dignity.

Knowing the boundaries in terms of what teachers are allowed

a stand for what is right. Teachers are encouraged—through the practices of research, reflection, and sharing with others—to help bring about needed changes.

## Communication

Numerous facets of communication impact professionalism. Among these are collaboration, cooperation, support and encouragement, and participation in learning communities, as well as basic modeling of proper language usage.

The NBPTS identified collaboration as one of the core propositions of accomplished teaching

(Helms 2001). That organization further cited the imperative for teachers to be members of learning communities where they work collaboratively with professionals, parents, and the community. Hurst and Reding (2000, 26) stated, “Building good, strong relationships is part of being a professional.” Teachers no longer can go into their classrooms, shut the door, and do their own thing. The changing nature of schools calls for teachers to collaborate with others and work effectively as a team toward common goals. Collaboration is essential for meeting the needs of all of students.

Hurst and Reding (2000) maintained that professionals support and encourage their colleagues. The students at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania participate in Professional Development Schools in cohorts. That program’s leaders work to create a sense of community and bonding that will carry over to the participants’ fieldwork. Teaching is hard work, and a little encouragement goes a long way. It is important for teachers to edify and support one another, to have opportunities to share their triumphs and tragedies. As professionals, teachers must focus on cooperation rather than competition.

Wong and Wong (1998, 300) advised that “professionals consult and help one another.” The NBPTS includes a proposition that encourages teachers to be members of learning communities (Seifert 1999). There are many opportunities for teachers to become involved in professional education groups early in their careers. Organizations—such as Kappa Delta Pi, discipline-specific organizations (such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the

National Science Teachers Association), and student versions of teacher union groups—provide vehicles for developing professional skills and expertise. Most of these organizations offer educational opportunities through conferences, workshops, and publications. Additionally, these organizations often are the breeding grounds for future educational leaders. Wong and Wong (1998) encouraged teachers to have a support group where they can learn from outstanding teachers and

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leaders. Participation in these groups can be an excellent way to connect with new sources of information and to give and get needed emotional support.

On a more basic level, Hurst and Reding (2000, 16) counseled, “Educating yourself as to the proper use of the English language is imperative if you want to be a successful role model to your students and present yourself in a professional manner to those with whom you come in contact.” A professional should sound like an educated person, always using proper speech and grammar. Here again, teachers need to be ap-

propriate role models for students.

## Closing Thoughts

Seifert (1999, 95) offered that “becoming truly professional is a lifelong challenge,” and he also stated:

*Professionalism is a process more than an outcome—a way of encountering new students and new classroom problems and of finding meaning and solutions to them as you grow. It is not a “thing” acquired or worn like a piece of clothing; at no time will you have become professional once and for all.*

The ideas presented here should help acquaint preservice and new teachers with the characteristics of professionalism. They also serve as good reminders to every educator regarding the level of professionalism that is expected of all teachers. Educators play a significant role in enhancing the professionalism of the teaching field by demonstrating these characteristics in their own professional lives.

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